

“Our Questions for God”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 23, 2023

8th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Job 42:1-5

I’m not just saying this because I am married to a language teacher, but one of the things I appreciate about my early educational experience is that the schools began teaching a second language – Spanish, in my case – in the second grade. From that young start, I have gone on to study – with varying degrees of success – French, Hebrew and Greek. But I believe my early introduction gave me an appreciation for the beauty and importance of language.

One of the things I remember learning early on about Spanish syntax is that in questions, a mark is placed at both the beginning (upside down) and ending (right-side up) of a sentence. So, when you say, for instance, *Como te llamas* (what is your name) or *Donde esta la playa* (where is the beach), you know at the beginning what inflection to use. In English, on the other hand, we sometimes don’t know how to voice it until the end, as with, *You’d like some coffee?*

We have almost reached the end of our Bumper Sticker Faith Series – next week we will look at one final message: *All Part of God’s Plan*. Up until now, it has been relatively easy to see that these well-known sayings – *Everything Happens for a Reason*, *Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin*, and *God Needed Another Angel* to name a few – are both not true (not actually derived from scripture) and not helpful (sometimes insensitive or even harmful).

Today’s Bumper Sticker Faith message – *Don’t Put a Question Mark where God Put a Period* – is a little more complex, for a number of reasons. For one, it sounds less like an actual quote from the Bible than some of the other messages. If you were to poll people on the street, many of them would believe that *God Won’t Give You More than You Can Handle*, for example, came straight from the pages of scripture. Not so much with today’s message.

Second, when we say *Don’t Put a Question Mark where God Put a Period*, it appears to describe a traditional characteristic of the divine: that God is all-knowing and all-powerful, God is unchangeable and immutable; what God says and does is a constant. If this is true, why would we even dare to question God?

We know that we have been called to faithfulness: to trust and follow in God's ways. We often hear the message – from within and beyond the church – that the opposite of faith is doubt, which discourages us from questioning God.

And, finally, when we do ask questions, it might mean that we are challenging traditional beliefs of the church. That can be a difficult thing to do. But, it places us squarely within our own Protestant heritage which proclaims, *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, often translated as “the Church reformed, always being reformed.” While God may, indeed, be immutable, the Body of Christ is always changing or, to be more accurate, *being changed* by God. Those things that we sometimes believe are God's periods are, instead, the ways we – with our limited or flawed understanding – have interpreted to be timeless and true.

Many of you know the story of Job or, at least, have heard people described as *having the patience of Job*. This man has endured great hardship, including the loss of fortune and family. Here, in the last chapter of this Old Testament book, Job finally offers his response to God. He acknowledges lacking God's power and wisdom, “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.” (42:3) He had accused God of creating a world of chaos, and God responded by showing Job the world as it really is: a place of order, but also of freedom and beauty, full of wild creatures Job never imagined in his former life.

Through that vision of creation, Job's fierce hope is fulfilled. Earlier, in the throes of despair, Job had proclaimed, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (19:25-27). Now, after the divine speeches, Job says to God, “I will question you, and you will declare to me. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (42:4-5). Through the grand vision of God's creation, Job's profound desire to be in the presence of God has been fulfilled. He has asked questions of God. He has seen God. And that vision moves him out of despair into life again.¹

Each of us, to varying degrees, experience this same chaos in life. We encounter trials and losses. Throughout the Book of Job, his friends offer explanations for why these hardships take place. They defend God and question whether Job has been sufficiently faithful. Job responds by remaining in

¹ Kathryn Schiffendecker from *WorkingPreacher.com*

relationship with God; listening to what they say but, also, looking to see how God acts in the world, caring for every creature.

For all their speaking *about* God, Job's friends never speak *to* God; they never once pray for their suffering friend. Job, on the other hand, moves from speaking *about* God to speaking more and more directly *to* God. Thus, for us, the story of Job is not only about how we, as individuals facing the chaos of life, should approach God, but also about how the Church, collectively, can come to better "see" God, through our questions for God.

Don't Put a Question Mark where God Puts a Period. This quotation is attributed most often to Joel Osteen, the best-selling author and pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. Like many Evangelical Christians, Osteen teaches that we are to accept God's will for our lives and not question the apparent blessings or curses that come our way. He, and other televangelists, preach a "Prosperity Gospel" which proclaims that God will reward faithfulness with tangible signs of overcoming hardship and material gain.

In our Reformed tradition, we likewise pray for God's will to be done. And yet, we also believe that "grace is at the center of all we know and experience about God. In Jesus Christ, we know God as One who takes the initiative to move toward us freely, unconditionally, lovingly."² We are united in the conviction that God has given Godself to humankind in Jesus Christ and that we can trust in our experience of God as the One who forms and re-forms us in Christian community.

Thus, we believe that asking questions does not mean a lack of faith; that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but, instead, certainty, which can stifle growth. It was not too long ago that we, in the church, believed that women were not called into positions of ordained leadership in the church. I was in middle school when my mother was elected as one of the first-ever female elders in my home congregation. Surely, we can see now, that this prohibition was not based on any biblical mandate. For we know that the first witnesses to the Gospel were the women who went to the tomb on Easter morning.

There is nothing inherently wrong with traditions. They are actually very useful: it is our practices – prayer and singing, serving and giving – which bring faith to life. The danger comes when we place our trust in *traditionalism*, which is an uncritical deference to the past. Instead, we believe that God is always at work renewing, recreating, and reforming the church and its practices. This allows us to

² Joseph D. Small, *God and Ourselves: A Brief Exercise in Reformed Theology*, p. 35

experience a living tradition through which our understanding about who we have been called to accept, include, love, and serve can constantly grow.

So, sometimes when we say *Don't Put a Question Mark where God Put a Period*, it is analogous to the church's seven most famous words - "It has always been done that way." For, we often mistake our own traditions and understandings for God's will rather than putting grace at the center of who we are and what we do. As Presbyterian theologian Joe Small says, "Neither our works nor our faith can save us; neither is a necessary precondition to God's love. Instead, both our faith and our works are expressions of gratitude for God's amazing grace."³

Though he may not have had the language to articulate it, Job came to experience this amazing kind of grace. Not because he was able to avoid chaos and tragedy – surely, he received more than his fair share – but because, through his willingness to pray to, engage with, and question God, Job finally came “see” God in a different way.

So, what are our questions for God? What do you wonder about? What causes you to doubt? Like me, you might be questioning whether there is motivation to move beyond our political divides, where there is sufficient will to turn around our environmental destruction, or what role the church has to play in this changing world? You may wonder whether intelligent life exists elsewhere in our universe or what it will take for us to eradicate global hunger. You might want to know why evil or illness exists.

Friends, I believe we are called to a living faith, to embrace our tradition without falling into traditionalism, engaging with God while fully investing in each other. In order to be *The church reformed, always being reformed*, we need to welcome curiosity and listen to voices that have been silenced for too long. We must serve – as our denomination's ordination vows say – with energy, imagination, intelligence, and love. And we must not confuse expressions of doubt with the lack of faith.

Our question marks belong at the beginning and the end – and everywhere in between. Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Small, p. 36